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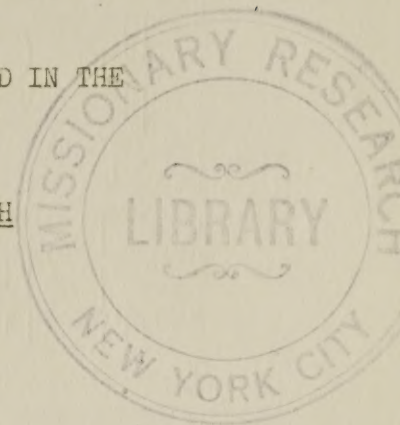
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NORTH AMERICAN TRAINING RESOURCES THAT SHOULD BE MORE WIDELY USED IN THE  
PREPARATION OF MISSIONARIES AND NATIONALS FOR RURAL WORK

11. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, EVANGELISM AND THE RURAL CHURCH

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As I understand it, the function of evangelism is primarily that of reaching the unreached. It is unnecessary to talk about reaching the unreached in mission fields because that is a primary function of the missionary, and techniques necessarily vary from field to field.

The function of religious education is to develop the individual Christian personality in his social environment. This must include both the development of Christian personality and the development of Christian society. The function of religious education, in other words, is to make the individual at home in the world, --a world that includes God, and, from our point of view, the Christian concept of God. What resources of value have we in evangelism and religious education that will help workers in rural areas either in foreign lands or at home?

As to written material, it must be said that most of the available literature for religious education has been prepared with the urban point of view in mind. I have again consulted Dr. Dawber's study of this matter. As he has indicated, many Christian educational materials prepared for urban centers may be used in rural areas, but there must be an educational program prepared from the point of view of rural people. Christian education in rural fields must take account of the rural situation and the programs must be prepared to fit the rural needs. This is not now adequately done either for rural America or for other rural regions. When we look for the literature of Christian education designed particularly for rural churches and rural schools, we can't find them. They do not exist.

Religious education in our modern sense of the term is relatively young. Many of the men who were instrumental in launching it on its present course are still living. One of the difficulties of religious education is that of trying to find its own direction, develop its own philosophy, in short, to know where it is going. All too often the content of religious education has been very remote from the general trend of current thought and life. The International Council of Religious Education for some years gave its attention to the development of curriculum materials but, unfortunately, it has been quite barren so far as rural religious education is concerned. Unhappily, many study courses have undergone so much trivial criticism that they have been sterilized in the process of preparation and all of the bright ideas have been eliminated in the editing. In much such literature there hasn't been an adequate contact with life processes, especially rural life.

One idea which is now gaining attention in educational circles is that of beginning with the individual where he is. This is an elementary statement and perhaps is not a great contribution, but I am inclined to think that it has value for rural mission workers since it suggests the method of approach for the religious educator. I regret that my personal contact with the Oriental world has been just with the western end of it. However, I understand that in the Orient religion is much more of an individual matter than we often conceive it to be from our western point of view, therefore the individual approach is native to the East. I have a Japanese friend who goes to church, along with a congregation of seven or eight hundred other people, from a sense of duty, but when he wishes to worship, he goes fishing. He is thinking in terms of personal contact with God which he doesn't get in mass worship. Apparently, beginning with the individual is good technique for the mission field, and for the rural field in America, too. The New Testament indicates that this was the method Jesus used. It is a religious education resource that has been rediscovered.

I would like to call attention to one or two matters growing out of the rural situation here in America which have important implications. I am thinking in terms of two rural communities in Indiana. From the viewpoint of traditional evangelism, and especially from the point of view of many Disciples of Christ, certain people of these communities have been "reached." The Disciples, of course, have always been intent upon going into communities and baptizing folks. Too often this has been looked upon as evangelism, and these same folks, while still babes in Christ, have been abandoned. Hundreds of rural churches in America--many of them in Indiana--have never had a resident minister. There have been two very notorious characters who were products of this method of evangelism. Both were products of rural communities; both attended Christian churches. The first I am thinking of is John Dillinger who was "evangelized" from the traditional point of view. But when he returned from his first prison sentence, the good folk in the church would have nothing to do with the "tough boy." The pathway to destruction was thus marked. The other boy is Al Brady, a "baptized believer" who hasn't been caught yet. The G-men are still looking for him. He is the product of both rural and urban communities; of a little rural church and a great city church. I am not sure that an evangelism which permits results of that kind has much of a contribution to make to missionaries to rural areas in distant lands. We have had the revivalist technique in America. Now we are going into visitation and personal evangelism. But these techniques are not often applied in rural America. Regardless of techniques, it is not only essential that the unreached be reached. The reached must be kept. This calls for something better in rural religious education.

In the matter of Christian education, just now we are trying to get it down from highly theoretical situations into the practical field. Relatively little has been accomplished in the way of techniques as yet, but there are reasons for hope.

The question now is: What can be done? Perhaps a concrete suggestion will help. There are examples of the practical working out of positive religious educational programs that show the way to basic principles. For example, I know of a minister who entered the service of a church which received the combined support of the local Christian community. This minister entered the community, not to work against any specific evil, but to build up a positive program. He fostered a positive health program in that area. He cooperated with the county farm agent in the promotion of better agricultural methods and the building of boys' and girls' clubs. He made use of the home demonstration agent for the women of his community.

That part of the work was under the direction of his wife. He worked positively in the field of recreation. Quietly but aggressively he has been developing all these areas of individual and social enrichment. Last year the last place licensed to sell intoxicants closed its doors for want of patronage. It was not that he ever said a word against alcohol. He built a program that left no room for intoxicants. The essential elements of that program, so effective in the rural community, could be transplanted to any community in the world and made serviceable. It is dynamic, constructive, positive.

Protestantism has too long been protesting against everything. It is time that the church advocate the larger use of the positive factors of Christianity and make use of all the resources of our communities. Let us concentrate upon the positive aspects of religion and go on to build whole individual personalities in relation to the total society in which these individuals find themselves.

So far as rural America is concerned, such a program must be Bible based. This makes room for the individual approach in Christian education. It has been said that Jesus never succeeded in public but once,-when He was crucified; and that He never failed in private but once,-when before Pontius Pilate. The Biblically founded rural method in evangelism or education must emphasize the individual approach. The rural Christian must be prepared to live as a Christian individual in his rural community whether that community be Christian or not. This, it appears, is the one "resource" developed so far in the fields of evangelism and religious education that may be used by Christian missionaries whose work is in rural mission fields.

